

## **Boonton Zoning Change Could Usher In a New Era**

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**Paula Saha  
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BOONTON -- Boonton's roots were forged in the "Hollow" behind Main Street, where, during the Revolutionary War, a legendary ironworks operation along the Rockaway River supplied the military with everything from tea kettles to weapons.

These days, the Hollow could represent not only Boonton's past, but also its future.

Tomorrow, the board of aldermen will decide whether to change the area's zoning from industrial to residential high-density, clearing the way for a condominium development that some believe could spark a downtown revitalization.

Developer Elite Properties has proposed a 148-unit complex in two four-to-five-story buildings in the steep valley behind the central business district. Supporters include the town mayor, the Main Street organization and the local chamber of commerce.

Richard Brownstein, who heads the Tritown Chamber of Commerce, said the group feels the project would be "a great boost to the downtown area of Boonton, in driving traffic to the local merchants."

But critics say the project amounts to high-rise living that is grossly out of character for a bedroom community like Boonton. Monica Scozzafava and her husband Tony, both lifelong residents, have hired an attorney and a professional planner to fight the zone change.

The Scozzafavas do not live near the site but still believe the project is inappropriate. They say traffic will increase and many people in town do not want it.

"Boonton is such a small town that there should be no 'Not in my backyard,'" Monica Scozzafava said. "It's in everybody's backyard. Everybody should be concerned about this ... the density of it, the size of it, so many floors, so many units. It's just too big."

Tomorrow will mark the second time the board of aldermen considers a project in the Hollow by Elite Properties. In April, the board rejected a plan for 260 condominiums on the same property, voting down a proposed zone change. But even then, Mayor Cyril Wekilsy believed the project was right for town.

"I've been saying that for two years," Wekilsy said last week. But over the last several months, he said, he has been heartened by support from various community groups and a team from the state Department of Community Affairs that have reviewed the project.

"The majority of people are saying it's a good idea," he said.

In August, Boonton Main Street's board of trustees adopted a statement supporting the rezoning, with some caveats, said board President Harold Johnson. They said the Elite Properties project could benefit Main Street, but there were some things that needed addressing: the historic preservation of the remnants of the Morris Canal and Boonton Ironworks, the recreational development of the Rockaway River gorge, the on-site pollution, the downsizing or relocating of the town recycling center and the relief of traffic on Main Street.

The developers say a lot of design and other details will be worked out if they get to the planning board stage. But, they add, the project fits perfectly with the concept of smart growth, which channels new development to older, urban centers with existing infrastructure.

"It's not expanding utilities to pristine property," said Elite's planner, Anthony Garrett.

The plan will include trails to provide access to the Rockaway River and restoring some of the paved areas to a natural state, Garrett said. There will also be connecting walks to stairwells that lead to Main Street, he said, and the project would trigger other potential improvements along the riverfront.

"We're seeing redevelopment like this throughout the state," said David Checchio of Elite Properties. "These sites are in terrible shape right now ... they're littered with debris and it's just not an attractive area. I think every town would want something to be done."

Ben Spinelli, who directs the state Office of Smart Growth, said his office does not exactly "endorse" projects but does like seeing private developers help towns clean up sites. "It's really the only way things get done," he said, noting the Hollow was a challenging site for development and he could understand why the mayor would support it.

Boonton is "in transition," Spinelli said. "This is a good point to take a good hard look at what they want Boonton to look like in the next 20 years ... They just have to be very careful they're getting something that's appropriate for the long-term vision of their community."